



Social Conflicts in *Arrow Of God*: Lessons in Flexibility and Good Governance

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's second novel, *Arrow of God*, is concerned with the theme of conflict. According to Holman C. Hugh (1960), there are four basic levels of conflict: struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist, the protagonist with the society, struggle in the mind of the protagonist or the protagonist struggling with fate, destiny or force of nature. Conflicts in *Arrow of God* delineate three of these struggles in a concentration of events leading to the destruction of the social order in the community (Umuaro). However, the conflicts are linked with colonialism which is at the root of the conflict. In this view, the novel is to some extent, a protest against colonialism and the suffering that it brought to the colonised people generally and the Igbo specifically. Arising from the above, this paper draws some implications from the actions of the protagonist to reveal the connection between a leader's flexibility and good governance as reflected in the life of the old chief priest (Ezeulu). The novel made its debut in 1964, symbolically marking a year since Nigeria's adoption of Republican Constitution. The connection between Umuaro's institution of Ulu and its priest as source of law and order with Nigeria's adoption of the republican constitution is made obvious in this study. Through this, the nexus between literature and reality is thus reinforced.

Keywords: Colonialism, Conflict, Myth, Protest, Governance, Republicanism

1. Introduction

Arrow of God (1964), hereafter denoted as *AOG*, follows the trend of Achebe's delineation of social conflict which arose as a result of colonial influence in Nigeria. Colonialism has often been seen to leave a trail of negative consequences in the ex-colonised communities. These trails are assumed to emanate from the Whiteman's attitude of derogation and denigration against the colonised people and their culture emanating from the accounts of European explorers and scholars in the pre-slavery era. Nkrumah (1959) observes that the history of Africa as presented by European scholars has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. Such disparaging accounts have been given about African society and culture so as to justify slavery, and slavery posed against these accounts served as a positive deliverance of our ancestors.

White historians and scholars have even during colonialism, continued to present a negative picture of Africa as 'dark continent' which God commissioned the white people to, on God's behalf, deliver from darkness. It was for the sake of negative portrayal of the Barolongs of South Africa that Sol. T. Plaatje, like Nkrumah, wrote his book titled: *Mhudi* (1930), to defend his people's customs and traditional life against imperialist denigration. Plaatje wrote to present his own people's story from their own point of view. In other words, *Mhudi* serves as a protest as well as a defence of his people's traditional life. His concern is to defend the custom of the traditional life of the Barolong and to some extent, to reinterpret history from the point of view of his own people.

Long before Plaatje, Gustaavus Vassah had published his writing as *Equiano's Travels* (1789). The name Equiano was an adulteration of the Ibo name Ekwuno which could not be properly pronounced overseas owing to Linguistic problems. This work was one of the earliest attempts by black writers to defend their people's integrity and cultural life which colonialists tried with great fervency to deny and denigrate. In this novel, Gustavus Vassah notes that he could remember, quite vividly, life in his community before he was captured and taken away to Europe as a slave at the age of twelve. He notes with passion and nostalgia that his people had history, poetry, songs, dances, dignity and that their women were uncommonly graceful, at least, in his own eyes (1992 edition of the novel). The Whiteman's report about Africans was that the people of Africa were not fully human, and that the cultural life being portrayed to the world as African culture was what the colonialist deposited in Africa. (Nkrumah, 1959: 20).

Achebe's *AOG* is partly to contradict this Whiteman's claim and to protest against the destruction of Africa's peaceful life hampered by colonialism. It is also in line with this 'protest' that other novels like *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* were written to show how Europe devastated Africa during colonization, correct the distortion about West African cultures, recreate the past in the present in order to educate the West African reader and give him the confidence in his cultural heritage, and also in order to educate the foreign reader and help him to get rid of the false impressions about the West African cultures acquired for centuries of cultural.

Emenyeonu (2004) opines that Achebe is a moralist whose concern for his society goes beyond the issue of change. As the voice of black continent, Achebe has clearly brought out the major burden of the black man with regards to his colonial experience and the postcolonial quest for asserting Africa's humanity and self realisation.

2. Conflicts in *AOG*

Conflict, as viewed by Holman, is the struggle which grows out of the interplay of two opposite forces in a plot. It is conflict which provides the element of interest and suspense in any form of fiction, whether it is a drama, a novel or a short story. According to him, at least one of the opposing forces is usually a person. Even when it is an animal or an inanimate object, it is treated as a person. This person, usually the protagonist, may be involved in conflict of four different kinds. Thus, the protagonist may:

- struggle against the force of nature;
- struggle against another person, usually the antagonist;
- struggle against the society as a force or two elements within him may struggle for mastery and;
- struggle against fate or destiny(Holman 1960:118).

The conflict in *AOG* is complex because it involves one figure (Ezeulu) in opposition with another individual, the society as a force and fate or destiny represented by the anthropomorphic god, Ulu. The struggles that can be seen clearly are the ones between the protagonist (Ezeulu) and the white District Commissioner (D.C.), Captain Winterbottom, and between Ezeulu and Umuaro community. The last struggle is between Ezeulu and his god, Ulu, taken as the struggle between the protagonist and fate or destiny. It is however the concentration of the struggles between Ezeulu and Captain Winterbottom and between Ezeulu and Umuaro clan that leads to the final denouement-the interference of Ulu itself.

According to Bogers and Mordaunt (2004), the chief priest introduced a new dimension in the psychological study of the main character. They assert that the main struggle in the novel is between Ezeulu and himself, the struggle, they claim, is to them reflective of the confusion in the traditional culture which Ezeulu is seen to represent. This assertion is not acceptable because the traditional culture is not seen to be a confused way of life, nor are the people uncivilized in their milieu. However, the focus of this paper is on the implication of the struggle of the chief priest with the community and on the African continent.

Conflict or struggle between Ezeulu and Captain Winterbottom is orchestrated by a land dispute between Ezeulu's clan, Umuaro and their neighbouring community, Okperi. The dispute attracts the intervention of the District Commissioner (Captain Winterbottom). In trying to settle the dispute, he is pleased with the evidence of Ezeulu against his own clan. He sees him as a transparent leader and desires to make him a warrant chief as a reward for his transparency. This is in line with Lord Lugard's indirect rule policy. He therefore sends for Ezeulu from his office at Okperi. Ezeulu however delays going to Okperi to answer the call of the D.C. This delay angers the D.C who considers it as an affront on his dignity and imperial authority. Mr. Clark who deputizes for the D.C. orders Ezeulu to be detained for two months. The two figures have their individual neurotic pride that is in conflict. It is these elements in them that are struggling for mastery in form of personality clash with each of the individuals being unable to recognise his limitation as the D.C. and chief priest respectively. This clash imperceptibly leads to the second struggle between Ezeulu and his community.

The struggle between Ezeulu and Umuaro community appears as Ezeulu's misdirected aggression at his clan for their failure to protest against his incarceration by Winterbottom. The new yam festival is due. The community is expecting to harvest and offer sacrifice to Ulu after which they will begin to harvest and eat the new yams. However, Ezeulu is expected to eat up the last of the old yam, which, on account of his incarceration he could not do. On his return, he decides that he must continue eating the old yams from the point where he stopped, as a way of punishing his people. The clan is thrown into hunger and starvation since the old yams had been consumed completely, and the new yams are rotting in the soil.

Ezeulu inherited his position from his father whom he understudied as an apprentice. During his period of apprenticeship, he learnt and understood the power struggle between the chief priest and the clan. He decided that whenever he took over the position of the chief priest of Ulu, he would rule the community with an iron-hand so as not to be taken for granted by his people. The chance to exercise this power play came after he was released from his detention by the D.C.

Hunger forces the people to the church which encourages them to bring their harvest of yams to it for God's blessing after which they could go ahead to eat their yams. Ezeulu's ploy to use his position to punish the community therefore fails as many men carry their yams to the church for blessing. Subsequently, they turn their back on Ezeulu and his god. This alienation proves to be a terrible blow to Ezeulu who, in turn is alienated by Ulu. Tragically, he loses his favourite son, Obika when he (Obika) is performing the Ogbazuruobodo run in the night.

The third struggle between Ezeulu and the god, Ulu, is displayed when Ulu begins to punish Ezeulu. Ulu appears to desert the priest when it dissociates itself with Ezeulu's antagonism against the community. Ezeulu fails to understand Ulu's rebuke: 'Taa nwamu, who told you that the battle is yours?'. Ezeulu's abandonment by his own clan and the mysterious death of his beloved son apparently throw him into sorrow and madness.

Ezeulu's struggle with himself which is internal or spiritual emanated from his selfish and headstrong attitude, his uncompromising attitude towards his community, his greed for power, thus usurping the power of Ulu and betraying his community both in the land case with Okperi clan and by sending his son Oduche to join the Whiteman's Church, against the will of the clan. Ezeulu however does not understand this raging conflict which the novel describes as an inherent lunacy originating from his mother, even when he remembers that his mother had a mental problem.

3. Implications of the Conflict in *AOG*

The colonial administrators, in their distinctive pride and lack of respect for Africa's traditional institutions, contributed much to the suffering of the colonised people. It was Winterbottom that brought about the suffering of the people of Umuaro and the eventual break-up of the clan by incarcerating Ezeulu for no just cause just as Europe has no regard for the black race who are associated, according to Nkrumah (1959) with inhuman myths. The reckless insensitivity with which Captain Winterbottom treats Ezeulu is a lesson which Ezeulu picks up and adopts to visit his clan. This attitude backfires against Ezeulu, but not Winterbottom who has a solid physical force to back up his administration and decisions. This attitude of the colonialists calls the full humanity of the colonised to question; this is part of what the novel *AOG* interrogates.

Apart from *AOG* serving as a protest against the suffering of colonised, the novel also depicts a social conflict dealing with the struggle for power and hegemony. In his vanity, pride and attachment to power, Ezeulu is bent on bringing Umuaro to their knees and subjecting them to his whims and caprices. The political implication of this conflict to the Nigerian nation is that the novel, published in 1964, a year after Nigeria symbolically adopted the Republican constitution delineates a struggle between republicanism and arbitrary rule. Umuaro people instituted the god to serve as their rallying point and the defence against their threatening war-like neighbours, especially the Abame community. The priest is appointed as the servant of the community and as their intermediary between them and their god, not as a weapon against the people in the hand of the god. This scenario compares with the nation which instituted the Republican constitution and their leaders who are expected to serve the people and enable them realise their national yearnings and aspirations. In accordance with democratic principles, the leaders are expected to serve the people, not wield arms against the people who put them in power. Achebe's *AOG* therefore raises the question of what should be the relationship between the leader and the people in a social system. In his role as a 'teacher', Achebe explores this idea to demonstrate that republicanism entails creating leadership according to the needs of people. The leadership thus created must ensure the overall interest of the nation that set it up.

In the designation of this concern, Achebe relates social responsibility with individual idiosyncrasy. The overwhelming impression that emanates from this is the notion that although the society imposes its limit on one's social conduct, it has little access or control over the integrity or motivation of man. This is why although Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *AOG* are both leaders in their societies, their undoing emanates from the forcefulness of their integrity which translates into characteristic rigidity or fixity of character, and this is the feeling of self-rightness which the accentuation of the self and the tussle for power generate and aggravate.

Povey pointed out that actions of leaders in the novels, *TFA* and *AOG* portray this flaw in character. He states:

...Okonkwo's integrity has a certain inability in the fixity of spirit, but it includes an element of folly, for no man can be so assured of his own rightness. Such an attitude brings destruction to Okonkwo as surely as it rightness does to the old priest, Ezeulu in *AOG*.... (1976: 41).

In general terms, the interior or inner recesses of man acts upon desire and pride and thus becomes the measure of the limits of individual yearnings vis a vis social responsibility. In so designating the predicaments of Umuaro people, Achebe implies a parallel with the contemporary society, inferring that what transpired in Umuaro, owing to bad rule can also affect the contemporary state if leaders adopt 'a fixity of spirit'. In this perspective, Achebe's depiction of social conflict in the novel has a relevant lesson for his society, a lesson for good governance through flexibility'.

In line with Achebe's defence of his people's cultural heritage in his work, *Things Fall Apart*, he uses the issue of traditional religion whose import in the society the foreign readers are not likely to appreciate, to intellectualise on matters of immense cerebral dimension. Traditional religion therefore provides in the novel a gateway to an exalted thematic discourse on nationhood and governance.

Finally, there is the implied assumption that Ezeulu, like most post-colonial leaders (or rulers) in Africa, inherited arbitrariness and avidity for power as a legacy from the colonial officials that ruled before independence. Ezeulu's dastardly abuse of power did not come to a head until after his detention. His reckless infringement on the rights of his community to harvest their yams is akin to Winterbottom's mindless treatment meted out to him, which he now decides to visit on his community. There is a link between the highhanded disrespect and abuse of traditional institutions and human rights in the colonised societies during the colonial era, and the classical abuse of power by the post-colonial African leaders as portrayed by Ezeulu (Anaso 2013).

4. Conclusion

Achebe remarks that the writer should be involved in the re-education and regeneration of his society if he must save humanity from total destruction. He demonstrates this idea in *AOG* where he dwells on the society and the role of good leadership so as to enhance the life of the community. Apart from showing how colonialism has defrauded mankind, Achebe brings in this important theme of leadership in order to re-educate and re-generate his society.

The theme of leadership is as relevant in Nigeria today as it was at its debut, owing to the country's lingering and intractable political problems and challenges of nationhood. *AOG* touches on Nigerian society as much as it does for the rest of black and other erstwhile colonised nations. In these countries, the problems of transfer of power with the attendant governance and political leadership quagmire are glaring as leaders cling unto power in total abuse of both the constitution and the political process. *AOG* is therefore a catechism on good leadership for African nations- East, West, North and South.

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